

TO BELIEVE IN OURSELVES AGAIN

by Allan C. Carlson

Editor's Preview: How did the self-confident America of the 1950s come to doubt its world mission and its own goodness so deeply in the next decades? Are we now rallying to believe in ourselves again?

Something new in history took shape with this country's founding, argues Rockford Institute scholar Allan Carlson: a strong, stable linkage of political and economic freedom with religious values and family bonds.

Since 1960 that linkage has been weakened by hammer blows from the radical Left, anti-growth Malthusians, and a priesthood of hedonistic irresponsibility. Churches, the entertainment media, and the social sciences have become adversaries rather than defenders of the American spirit.

The ethic of family, faith, and work has sagged dangerously, but a turnaround seems to have begun in the 1980s. While the war of ideas is far from won, *Imprimis* this month presents an encouraging battle report and a leadership agenda for the years ahead.

What is an American? In contrast to only twenty-five years ago, the answer to that simple question is no longer clear.

Since about 1960, Americans have grown increasingly unsure of themselves, their governments, and the array of institutions that once had affirmatively defined or supported the American spirit.

To help restore our country's confidence as a leader among nations, we will need to take stock of the enduring aspects of the American spirit; identify some of the sources of current confusion; and outline a program for renewal.

Since the time of the American Revolution, the basis of our national character was a devotion to human liberty and a recognition of liberty's primary defense: the institution of private property.



As the philosopher John Locke put it in his classic formulation, mankind's inalienable rights were life, liberty and property. Some find it odd that neither of our founding documents—neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution of 1787—directly mentions private property, a phrase making its appearance only with the Fifth Amendment.

But the simple fact is that recognition of property's role in securing individual liberty was so widely assumed and understood by the nation's founders, as to hardly merit mention.

Yet the new human type—the American-taking shape in the decades during and after the Revolution was more than a fellow with a constitution in his pocket and a clear title to his land. Thomas Jefferson hinted at this broader understanding in drafting the Declaration of Independence, when he dropped "property" from Locke's list of basic human rights, and substituted instead the curious phrase, "the pursuit of happiness."

Linkage of Family, Religion, and Property

Historians are unclear about what Jefferson exactly had in mind in using these words, but they agree that he was moving away from a cold acceptance of pure self-interest as the defining quality of the American nation, and toward a notion of social harmony and affection. It appears that Jefferson—the country squire from Virginia—was sensing the emergence of an altogether novel kind of political entity in North America: what historians call the middle class, or bourgeois republic.

The republic of commerce, resting on private property, would also be a republic of sentiments, rooted in religious values and in the emotions of the home. This linkage of economic freedom to religious values and family bonds would actually come to *define* the American.

Jefferson himself was not a deeply religious man. But there is little question that religious values motivated the broad generation of men and women who created this nation. As the great philosophers of republican liberty—from Montesquieu to Madison—understood, a free society must also be a religious society, a society where moral virtue restrains the passions and guides individuals toward the common good.

Writing from the perspective of the 1830s, the keen French observer Alexis de Tocqueville concluded that the exceptional virtue, moral fiber and self-restraint shown by Americans was due to the extraordinary influence of the Christian faith in this land. “It was religion that gave birth to the English colonies in America,” Tocqueville wrote. “One must never forget that.”

While religious sentiment remained highly potent in its influence, he continued, it had voluntarily defined its own limits and purposefully remained distinct from the political sphere. “In this way,” Tocqueville concluded,

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This article is adapted from Dr. Carlson's lecture at a Shavano Institute Seminar in Chicago earlier this year, on the overall topic, “How Business Can Fight Back in the War of Ideas.”

“Christianity has kept a strong hold over the minds of Americans....”

A New Kind of Home

The decades of the late 18th and early 19th centuries also saw a basic, even revolutionary change in how Americans viewed their families. The older family style—then passing away—placed its emphasis on blood-line or lineage, on emotional restraint, and on rigid formality in parent-child relationships. In contrast, the new family style emerging in America turned toward love and domesticity, or the home, as the central arena for the pursuit of happiness. This new family model grew up around the vital spark of the maternal-infant bond, which reached out to envelop the husband and older children.

Tocqueville, again, recognized this wholly new kind of family existing in America and expressed deep awe over what he found. In place of the formal, restrained, often loveless patriarchy still dominant in Europe stood the new American family, resting on equality, where “every word a son addresses to his father has a tang of freedom, familiarity and tenderness all at once...”

The French visitor was particularly impressed by the relationship of the sexes in the United States. Among Europeans, he noted, there were those who, “confusing the divergent attitudes of the sexes, claim to make of man and woman creatures who are, not only equal, but similar.” Yet such efforts, Tocqueville argued, degraded both sexes and produced “nothing but feeble men and unseemly women.” Much superior, he believed, was the American approach to democratic sexual equality, where the “great principle of political economy”—the division of labor—had been wisely applied, giving both sexes a chance to fulfill their natural roles as well as possible.

All foreign visitors to America, Tocqueville noted, agreed that sexual morality was “infinitely stricter” in the new United States than anywhere else in the world. In America, he reported, all books—even novels—supposed women to be chaste, and no one boasted of amorous adventures.

The key to this new family style, Tocqueville concluded, was American women. “There have never been free societies without moral values,” he wrote, “and...it is woman who shapes these values.” Asking himself what was “the chief cause” of the extraordinary prosperity, growing power, and self-confidence of the Americans, Tocqueville answered simply that it was due “to the superiority of their women.”

Downhill from the Fifties to the Eighties

This confidence in the American character—resting on a unique national blend of freedom, family, and faith—remained solid well into our own century.

As late as 1957, a major liberal intellectual figure—namely Walt W. Rostow, then professor of economic history at M.I.T.—could offer a stirring affirmation of the American identity resting on faith in God and fami-

ly. In a speech that year, Rostow insisted that there was a classic "American style" which was born in the eighteenth century and which had not substantially changed. Americans, he argued, had fashioned national unity out of Protestant values and the dreams of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Such "shared values" and "participation in the special adventure of America," he argued, served as "more than a substitute for conventional patriotism."

The American nation from the time of its origin had embodied a sense of "transcendent ideological destiny," Rostow said. American diplomacy had succeeded in the past because it was undergirded by a feeling of moral



legitimacy, "a sense that it was right to expand on this continent the American system and way of life." While somewhat chastened by events in recent decades, he added, Americans had "by no means wholly lost a sense of mission, based on confidence and pride in the success of a unique moral, political, economic, and social experiment."

At the core of that success story, by Rostow's account, lay private social communities such as families and churches which worked "to weave a highly individualistic and mobile population into a firm social fabric," capable of bearing world responsibility. Even in the post-World War II era, he declared, economic prosperity, the renewed growth in church attendance, strong family norms and a booming American birth rate showed that this nation was the prime embodiment of all that was good in the modernization process.

Today, less than thirty years later, we hear few voices that affirm America's identity and purpose with such self-confidence. How did this change come about?

Accidents, Cycles, or Real Villains?

Some attribute our loss of confidence to specific events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate. I believe, however, that such events were not the causes of our current discontents, but rather symptoms of deeper social and cultural problems.

Others argue that we are simply caught in an inevitable cycle of national decline; that America's moment on the stage of history as a self-assured world leader has passed, and that we must engage in a retreat from global standing and responsibility. I must also reject this vision as a flawed perception of both America's past and future.

Rather, I think that we can identify *real villains* in the saga of America's loss of confidence: both intellectual movements and individuals who, in the war of ideas, either openly assaulted the foundations of the American adventure or who failed in their responsibility to defend those foundations.

To begin with, let me point to the radical Left. It is important here to remember that the Marxist and socialist Left has never confined its attacks to purely economic institutions such as the free market or private property. It

has always consciously aimed at destroying the whole of bourgeois, or middle-class, civilization.

For example, *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 promised, as one program: the "abolition of private property"; the "abolition of the family"; a "radical rupture" with religious belief; and "the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions."

In his 1884 treatise with the revealing title, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels—Karl Marx's close collaborator—put an even finer point on the connection between capitalism, the family, and morality: "With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of children becomes a public affair: society looks after all children alike, whether they are legitimate or not...[W]ill not that suffice to [finally] bring about the gradual growth of unrestrained sexual intercourse?"

Marx and Malthus

American New Left activists of the 1960s seized such anti-family attitudes with enthusiasm, correctly perceiving that capitalism and the modern family were closely related enemies. As one American radical wrote in 1971: "The institution of the family is inherently reactionary, and helps to maintain the capitalist system. The family...is oppressive to its members...Each nuclear family...weakens the class consciousness of the workers." Such activists, while always a small minority, did attract disproportionate attention from the media, did intellectually compromise vast numbers of our institutions of

higher learning, and did have an influence in reshaping the policies and priorities of the Democratic Party.

A second, less obvious, but equally destructive category of opponents to the American system were the neo-Malthusians, the ideological parents to both radical environmentalism and the population-control movement. Neo-Malthusians, as disciples of Thomas Malthus, believe that people—sheer human numbers—are the source of virtually all troubles; that human reproduction is the primary cause of hunger, poverty, resource shortages, and environmental decay.

Interestingly, Malthus's theory of population—that human numbers increase faster than the means of sustenance—has proven to be totally wrong: as wrong in 1798 when he first proposed it as it is today. Even Karl Marx saw the basic error in Malthusian doctrine, when he argued that human imagination and energy could leap beyond nature and actually *increase* wealth and usable resources at geometric rates exceeding even a high level of population growth. Recent work with modern data by American economist Julian Simon and other researchers has again affirmed the intellectual bankruptcy of Malthusian doctrine.

Nonetheless, neo-Malthusian ideas swept across America during the 1960s and '70s, with devastating results for both private property and the family. The more militant environmental groups used the theory of resource scarcity in efforts—often successful—to throttle development and growth, sacrificing measures of economic utility and the rights of private property to the bankrupt Malthusian shibboleth.

Meanwhile, the environmentalists' close ally—the population-control movement—turned its ire against the reproductive energies of the American family, implicitly casting our own children as the “enemy”; indeed, an enemy closely allied to capitalism. As population activists Anna and Arnold Silverman wrote, “Attitudes affirming parenthood are to childbearing what laissez-faire is to capitalism,” a dangerous ideology.

Toward a Child-Free World

Groups such as Zero Population Growth began systematic campaigns aimed at undermining “the myth of Mom and Apple Pie” and attacking historic American attitudes exalting marriage, the home, motherhood, and children. The federal government, between 1965 and 1972, also shifted from a tacit policy of welcoming population growth and large families to an explicit policy aimed at ending population growth and discouraging the birth of children. The dramatic drop in the American birthrate after 1960, the rising numbers of so-called “child-free” couples, and the legal and cultural desanctification of marriage all suggest that the neo-Malthusians achieved their goal.

A third group that undermined the American adventure might be labeled the Priests of Moral and Social Ir-

responsibility. On the male side, I would have to include slick-paper pornographers ranging from almost-mystic sophisticates such as Hugh Hefner to “women-on-a-meathook” editors like *Hustler's* Larry Flynt.

As ol' Hef clearly and contemptuously wrote in his first issue of *Playboy*, “We aren't a ‘family magazine.’” In fact, the so-called Playboy philosophy did not rest on eroticism at all, but rather on a philosophy of escape from the bondage of family and breadwinning, involving an open critique of marriage focused on “gold digging” wives, the dismissal of children as irrelevant obstructions to genital pleasures, and a utopian vision focused on hedonism. Interestingly, the Playboy Foundation was one of the earliest, and remains among the most important, funding sources for the pro-abortion movement; as with the Malthusians, our own children are here again cast as the menace.

When the Playboy Press published in 1973 its own “official history” of the sex revolution, the volume was entitled *The Rape of the *American *Puritan *Ethic*. In surprisingly candid terms, author Allan Sherman described the process whereby a portion of the generation coming to adulthood after 1945 turned against the American ethic: “We produced and sold the rock 'n' roll records with risqué lyrics; we invented the term ‘wonder drugs,’ and LSD as the true panacea, pushing it at the kids in the hallowed atmosphere at Harvard. My generation wrote and read bestsellers with nothing more to recommend them than a half-dozen paragraphs of old-fashioned smut.... We invented or at least perfected wife-swapping. We crowded into the dark to watch those stupid stag films.”

According to Sherman, this assault soon extended to the whole “incredibly clean-cut and impossibly wholesome” American world of Disney, church socials, Shirley Temple, the YMCA, Blondie and Dagwood, *The Saturday Evening Post*, motherhood, miniature golf, apple pie, and hot dogs. In the end, Sherman wrote, the sex revolution of the 1960s and early '70s “removed America's backbone and revealed our awful secret: Stripped of the Puritan ethic, we have no morals at all.” Even today, in a symbolically rich act, Larry Flynt is pouring tens of thousands of dollars into his own, well-publicized vendetta against organized religion.

Blood cousin of this male transformation was the radical feminism that emerged during the late 1960s. Recall figures such as Germaine Greer, who urged American women to abandon their homes, husbands, and children in the pursuit of their individual desires and sexual fulfillment. Or remember the feminist author from the same era who labeled the American home “the basis of all evil.” Or contemplate the radical egalitarian who argued that women could find true equality only by remaining “child free.”

In sum, I believe it is a mistake to assume that a national culture can openly flaunt hedonism and social

irresponsibility as proper, even superior, ways of life and not then pay some major price. In countless ways, we are now reaping the bitter harvest.

And Some of Our Own Deserted

Such opponents as these three were formidable enough. But the historic American character also found the institutions that had once *supported* it deserting to the other side. From a long list, let me offer again a few examples:

First, the churches themselves, which started engaging in their own unwitting suicide. Symbolic of this change is the saga of the National Council of Churches of Christ, an ecumenical body composed of over 30 Protestant and Orthodox denominations. Given its current orientation toward anti-capitalism, anti-Americanism, moral relativism, and predictable support for leftist revolutions, it comes as a shock to recall that the NCC was created in 1948, in part, by laymen such as oil executive J. Howard Pew and Wall Street lawyer and later Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

Indeed, in its early years, the NCC was an expression of America's pervasive religiosity; it was a product of the optimistic, affirmative American ethos of the post-World War II decades.

But during the 1960s, the NCC leadership and bureaucracy lost the will to sustain any longer the American adventure. Instead, this bureaucracy began to borrow agendas from secular political movements and to ignore and eventually ridicule the average American church-goer who paid their salaries. Mimicking the Marxists, broad elements of the NCC bureaucracy elevated America into the "focus of evil" for the world, and by the late 1970s seldom missed an occasion to attack historic American ideals and institutions.

Leftward Ho

Similar tales could be told about numerous "mainline" Protestant and Jewish faith groups which accompanied the NCC in the institutional drift toward the generally anti-American Left. Even many Roman Catholic bishops now seem determined to catch up with their ecumenical brethren by also sacrificing doctrine and spirituality to political maneuvering. While the majority of folks in the pews by no means have followed these pied pipers of self-righteousness, bad ideas have spread widely.

A second institution that shifted from support to assault, albeit more subtly, was the electronic media. Recall programming from the 1950s such as *The Donna Reed Show*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. While poking gentle fun, these shows affirmed American family life and—more importantly—cast the American home as the scene of the most significant conflicts and rewards in individual lives.

But the 1970s gave birth to a new breed of "family shows" such as *One Day at a Time* or *Three's Company*; and to others such as *Lou Grant*, *St. Elsewhere*, and *Hill Street Blues* which projected a de-familized America: a

culture where the workplace had replaced the family as the most important determining focus in life.

A third institution which shifted from support to attack was the social sciences. During the 1950s, for example, the field of family sociology was dominated by Harvard University's Talcott Parsons, a man who believed the American family structure to be a vital social institution resting on a solid set of historic values. Parsons also affirmed that the United States, although having no established church, remained firmly rooted in generalized Judeo-Christian religious values. He concluded that American society retained "a moral mission" rooted in family and religious life, toward which the individual was understood to be "an instrumentality."

Yet by 1970, Parsons's ideas were wholly out of favor, and new idea currents were shaping the social sciences. Representative of this change was the Forum 14 Report of the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth, where a representative sample of America's most prominent sociologists dismissed the traditional American family as outdated, denied any American identity, and welcomed the contemporary movement "to destroy the cultural myth of 'right' or 'best' way to behave, believe, work or play." Applauding the apparent troubles of the American family model, this group urged the adoption of a new definition of "family" that would embrace "single parent," "communal," "group marriage," and "homosexual" varieties.

By the mid-1970s, such ideas controlled the sociological profession and shaped the attitudes and actions of a generation of teachers, marriage-and-family counselors, clergymen, psychologists, and so-called "sex therapists." When released on the world, their cumulative impact was staggering.

The Road Back

What have been the results of this multiple onslaught on our national self-confidence?

Relative to the family, the changes were unprecedented and enormous. In the twenty years after 1960, the number of children annually affected by divorce tripled. The American fertility rate was cut in half between 1957 and 1975, reflecting a massive retreat from child-bearing. The USA's illegitimacy ratio rose three-fold over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. The incidence of human abortion rose from less than 100,000 abortions each year in the early 1960s, to 570,000 in 1973, and to 1.6 million in 1982. By the early 1980s, one million American children were living on the streets, with police estimating that one-third of them supported themselves through prostitution.

Even parental love seemed to be threatened. In 1980, polls indicated that 75 percent of Americans would agree with the statement that "parents should be free to live their own lives even if it means spending less time with their children."

In sum, a family system dating back to the American Revolution, and for many decades the wonder of the world, was in deep turmoil.

Work attitudes also suffered, as family-oriented motivations for getting ahead faded away. Where 34 percent of Americans placed work near "the center" of their lives in 1970, only 13 percent did so in 1978. The average number of personal working hours per week fell from 38.6 in 1960 to 35.4 in 1980. According to a recent study Americans are instead spending their time engaged in personal care, sleep, active leisure, and television-watching.

So what's to be done? As I have tried to show, the critical battles have been and are being fought in the world of ideas. During the 1960s and '70s, the defenders of property, family, and religious values were clearly on the defensive; and even routed at times. But during the 1980s, I'm pleased to report, that is no longer the case.

I think it is clear to most observers that the other side stands today as intellectually and morally bankrupt; only its control of the major levers of opinion-making continues to hide that fact. Virtually all of the excitement in intellectual circles today is being generated in defense or reconstruction of the founding American principles.

I also take heart from the many young Americans who are sick of the cultural drift and nihilism seen in this land over the last 20 years, and who are prepared to respond to authentic, courageous leadership, a commodity that has lately been in short supply. Success or victory is not assured; but for the first time in decades victory does now seem possible.

Agenda for Leadership

In pursuing the task of reconstruction during the decades ahead, then, we must—

—First, reaffirm America's founding principles as a universally sound prescription for the just political order;

—Second, recognize and always take into account the implacable hostility of Marxism-Leninism to those principles;

—Third, recast free-market capitalism and bourgeois culture as morally rich and ethically sound conceptions of the good society.

On the family question, the contemporary need is for a systematic theory of the family, created independent of now-dominant trends in social science, and rooted in human love and the affirmation of children.

In the religious sphere, the first task is to counter with intellectually sophisticated arguments the knee-jerk anti-Americanism and thinly veiled socialism reigning in many church bureaucracies. Then we must work to rebuild, in a positive manner, the Judeo-Christian foundation of the American experiment.

New initiatives are underway on each of these fronts, aimed at rebuilding America as a morally compelling social order.

We now have the opportunity and tools to reinvigorate the American spirit. I encourage you to help turn the energies and resources of the business and professional communities toward those intellectual, academic, and cultural forces which are today working to reconstruct a public philosophy for the American experiment.

That is the challenge facing those who have benefitted from and who believe in the historic American system. The war of ideas exists, and it can be won, but only if enough people still believe that the American adventure has claim on their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor,



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